"Inventedness" and Inventiveness: for a Postmodern Linguistics

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If you ask the man on the street about the quality of young people's language and spelling, they will tell you that it was better before; what with shorthand in text messages or on internet chats, the young are supposedly making the language change for the worse. However this seems to be a permanent feature in linguistic assessment: throughout the centuries, people have recurrently complained about the deterioration of language. As opposed to scientific invention which is usually considered as synonymous with some form of progress, linguistic change has rarely been perceived as positive.[1] At best linguistic invention is viewed positively when it is in the hands of literary writers taking some liberty with the language substance. Literary linguistic "creation" has indeed been conceived in terms of fictional deviation from the standard linguistic path considered as the "right" one.[2] The purpose of this talk is to illustrate that this traditional assertion can and should be qualified and rethought. In this respect the repeated attempts at arresting language evolution and fixing usage to stop it from so-called degradation belong to what I shall call "inventedness" (with the "ed" suffix signifying the codification of language once and for all). We will see that what we call fictional invention might not be where we think it is.

We shall thus first focus on cases of "inventedness" all characterised by the same refusal of collective linguistic transformation, and see to what extent the politically correct phenomenon can be included in that category before asking ourselves if linguistic inventiveness in literature is to be set radically apart from normal linguistic activity. Finally we will show that in trying to theorize the place of the linguist, what a "postmodern" linguistics is calling for is a more encompassing interpretative linguistics.

I. Cases of "inventedness"

History is full of attempts at abstracting language from contingency and transformation. The aim of the universal language projectors of the 17th century for instance was to subject language to an unprecedented rationalization so as to render mistakes and misunderstanding impossible: language would at last be disinfected from any contamination emanating from popular usage. Prescriptive

1 "There is a curious myth widespread in the world: many people believe that their language can somehow be 'pure' [...] and that anything which interferes with this imagined purity (especially words borrowed from other languages) is a corrupting influence, altering the language's 'true character'" (David Crystal 57).

2 Drawing on Lévi-Strauss 's *Introduction à l'oeuvre de M. Mauss*, Barthes points out that literature is the site of verbal anomalies "as society fixes, recognizes and assumes it in the honour it grants its writers" (Roland Barthes 151, "Le Style et son image", my translation).

grammars are another instance of the same desire to control language and guard it from its users. If grammarians relied on the Latin structure to fix the English language, it seems because, as a dead language, it had the particular advantage of no longer being spoken (Canto 709). We can find here the greatest examples of linguistic inventions which came to be established as the "correct" forms from which every deviation would be from then on considered as "incorrect" or "bad" English. We have been told to say "it is I" in "very correct" English (where everybody naturally says "it is me") as if it was a principle inherent to the language itself. It was in fact built to conform to the Latin expression where the verb "to be" takes a nominative pronoun as in "sum ego" (McWhorter 67).

But sometimes standardized forms are the result of individual creation from inventors endowing themselves with the authority to take language out of history and contingency. Prescriptive rules have sometimes had a lot to do with the whimsical attitude of these self-established linguistic referees. For instance the idea that "shall" is used with the first person and "will" with the second and third persons to indicate simple future while "will" in the first person and "shall" in the second and third express "determination, promise, obligation" etc., appears for the first time in 1653 in John Wallis's *Grammaticae Linguae Anglicanae* that English grammars have reproduced ever since (McWhorter 77).3 Likewise, a century later in 1762 Robert Lowth suggested that it would be more elegant to place the preposition before a relative and not at the end of the proposition. This mere personal preference, on which Lowth was not adamant at all, was turned into "an immutable rule" by nineteenth-century academics (Bryson 141).

What could also fall under the category of linguistic "inventedness" would be the more contemporary politically correct phenomenon. When it is imposed from above,[4] that is to say not chosen or naturally invented by people, it similarly advocates that there is such a thing as a correct way of speaking which one should follow if one aspires to social peace. Like all universal language creations looking for a neutral means of communication that would favour no country and bring about universal peace, political correctness supposedly aims at protecting minorities from taking offence. It reinvents language so as to freeze it into a unique, polite and consensual version above linguistic, social and historical diversity. It shares with the other cases of "inventedness" the desire to repress both language's historical thickness and ongoingness. Jean-Jacques Courtine showed how American school books have been rewritten, improper words having been replaced by the only authorized politically correct versions. The censure that has been imposed on some novels has deprived many a schoolchild of at least part of the rich lessons which go into the making of a classic. For instance Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been evicted from the

3 It needs to be added though that John Wallis was one of the first grammarians who attempted to provide an English grammar doing away with the traditional Latin classifications of speech (Auroux 344).

4 Although often adopted by politicians, political correctness is also advocated by groups of people claiming for a fair and respectful identity.

American school syllabus because of its persistent mention of the word "Negro" (Courtine 24).

This purification or "pasteurisation" of language condemns words as historical and cultural sediments. In erasing all signs of social, political and cultural dissension, political correctness demands that we forget the past. Knowing the existence of the word "Negro" is to keep in mind a historical and linguistic reality, and be remembered that "Afro-Americans" have not always been referred to in this way. What Political Correctness and Standard English have in common is a similar denial of historical consciousness and relativism, as they both tend to make us forget they are mainly instances of "inventedness" and that other versions are or could have been possible. McWhorter recalls that Standard English, often considered as the only neutral, hence legitimate or superior model of English, was chosen as the reference simply

> because it happened to be the dialect spoken in the area that happened to become the centre of British government and education starting in the 1300s (the dialect was mostly a mixture of the Middlesex and Essex dialects). If the cultural centre had happened to have settled in Nottingham, then the English of the gamekeeper in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* would sound as smooth and elegant to us, and the language of Margaret Thatcher coarse and unrefined. (McWhorter 27-28)

Likewise, in refusing the survival of old linguistic references besides new ones, political correctness aims at freezing time and erasing all signs of cultural and social diversity, erecting itself as the new "correct" model to follow.

Perceived as such, "inventedness" could be said to convey a certain hegemonic totalitarian aspiration. Indeed, as Patrick Seriot aptly puts it, totalitarianism precisely consists in wiping out the signs of social division.5 Forbidding human intervention or any form of subjectivity, it imposes a homogeneous language from above, which is the same for everybody in all particular situations. Totalitarian language is a language without subjects, erasing people in the variety of their social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It decides for you what you can or should say/think and in that respect political correctness can be said to be dangerously similar. At the heart of all cases of "inventedness" lies this notion of a "correct model," inevitably implying the existence of an incorrect, impolite or illegitimate version. As literature creation rejects this notion of a homogenised invariable system of linguistic rules, no wonder then that literature is the first thing totalitarian regimes endeavour to destroy.

II. The Linguistic Inventor as *Bricoleur*

It is due to the persistence of this idea of a correct linguistic model that linguistic creations in literary texts have often been relegated to the rank of eccentricities or exceptions to the rules. Yet, literature cannot be merely conceived as some transgression as regards some pre-existing linguistic

5 "Si la démocratie est la défaite de l'identification de la société à un corps, on définira dans notre perspective le totalitarisme comme le fait d'effacer les signes de la division sociale, de bannir toute indétermination" (Seriot 253).

models but as making the most of a system of a language-still-in-formation. In the corpus I have been interested in—gathering contemporary English novels written in a distorted, disfigured English to the point of being almost unreadable, a far cry from neat Standard English—the writers seem to have found inspiration in the change already at play in oral language (Sorlin forthcoming). In their post-apocalyptic or science fiction writings, Anthony Burgess, Russell Hoban, Will Self or David Mitchell try to anticipate on linguistic change, and as such they are most faithful to language as an evolving system. Just as one can learn a lot about language among those who are deprived of "normal" language, as in aphasic cases for instance, by distorting language, in reinventing it, the novelists paradoxically get us fairly close to the essence of language. Charles Bally said it a long time ago, "creativeness is what makes us understand the mechanism of language" (Bally 28, my translation). Only when playing with linguistic frontiers, in making them stutter (to use Deleuze's term), can one make them apparent. By defamiliarizing language, in making it foreign, one can paradoxically see the outline of our language better.

Linguistic inventiveness (literary or not) is "invention" in the etymological meaning of the word, "inventio" ("to find"), implying that inventing consists in finding what is always already there. Making do with what is at hand, with what is always already collective, the inventor in that sense is more of a "bricoleur" of language, using old words to new purposes, renewing dusty expressions, in short, reinventing or re-imagining language. What motivates linguistic inventiveness is indeed the need to keep language alive and forceful. It is because it gets worn out very quickly and words lose their colour and strength by passing from mouth to mouth that language constantly needs to be renewed.[6] The linguistic bricoleur defamiliarises us with something we have always been familiar, to have us look at language from a different angle. Just as the "bricoleur" diverts elements from what they were *a priori* made for, the linguistic inventor upsets traditional categories. A lot of words were indeed created by a simple change in syntactic categories. Shakespeare for instance was daring in that way, using nouns as verbs, adverbs, or adjectives. Bill Bryson gives the examples "that could not grammatically have existed previously—such as 'breathing one's last' and 'backing a horse'" (Bryson 64). So we could say that linguistic "deviation" does not transgress the rules, it puts them to the test, subjecting them to an endless process of variations.

As the Italian philosopher Giorgo Agamben puts it, language seems to be the site of tension between two antinomical forces, torn between innovation or transformation (what he calls "anomy") and conservation or invariance as embodied by the grammatical norms (Agamben 173-174), or to use Judith Butler's phrase, linguistic invention is subjected to some constraints that are

6 Bally gives the example of the verb "ennuyer" ("annoy") saying that "embêter" has lost a lot of its force, hence the necessity to create successively "assommer, scier, canuler, raser, barber, tenir la jambe" and other verbs he says that cannot be printed (Bally 38).

"enabling" (Butler 59). The tension inherent to linguistic activity disappears when language alienates itself from its natural dynamic process of variation and inventiveness, thus resulting in an artificial creation. We have thus come to a complete reversal in perspectives: fiction/literature turns out to reveal the mechanism of language while standardized, homogenised English proves to be a mere fiction. We can almost go as far as saying that what we call "literary eccentrics" might be, linguistically speaking, the most conservative, while the centralised standard national language turns out to be, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle underlines, a political construct, existing nowhere (Lecercle 2004, 173).

Taking up Lévi-Strauss's dichotomy,[7] we have spoken of linguistic bricolage but does it preclude any engineering of language?

III. Linguistics as Pragmatic Interpretation

Structural linguistics, in its aspiration to become more scientific, had no other choice but to tend towards generalisations that could only be achieved through the separation of language from its genesis and its history. As Godel points out, a science of language inescapably requires some abstraction from what comes before and what links different periods together.[8] Would it mean that the linguistic engineer is bound to be tilting to the side of inventedness? Is she/he bound to alienate language from itself by isolating it from people and change in her/his scientific lab where she/he is designing tools perfectly adapted to his object of study? To be sure, what makes an engineering of linguistics difficult, is the fact that language is here both the substance / the subject-matter and the tool, as the linguist must use language as a tool to explain language itself.

But the problem with linguistics at its beginnings at least was not that it wanted to be more scientific but that it was not scientific enough. Roland Barthes deplored the fact that linguistics was still stuck "at its Newtonian stage: it has not yet gone through its Einsteinian revolution; it has not yet theorized the place of the linguist (of the one who observes) in the field of observation" (Barthes 127, my translation). Postmodern[9] science has indeed managed to do away with science's fascination with rationality as something closed/self-contained, and opened itself to the notion of unpredictability and subjectivity.10 Thermodynamics shed light on the unstable and chaotic

7 As opposed to the "bricoleur," the engineer "[subordinates each task] to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project" (Lévi-Strauss 17).

8 "*Il n'y a de 'langue' et de science de la langue* qu'à la condition initiale de faire abstraction de ce qui a précédé, de ce qui relie entre elles les périodes. Toute *généralisation* est impossible tant qu'on n'a pas séparé l'état de sa genèse" (quoted in Chiss 37).

9 The adjective "postmodern" is here to be construed in terms of temporality : Newtonian science being conceived as "modern," postmodern science would be post-Newtonian science. But the reference to "postmodernism" in its aesthetical aspect is also implicit if one defines it as "a more general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system," with what was regarded as marginal or eccentric taking new significance (Hutcheon 11-12).

10 Quantum physics reintroduces the so-far banned subjectivity into science. The observation of an object relies on the subjective intervention on the part of the observer. You can for instance "prefer" to look at reality from the

behaviour of physical phenomena that Newton's classic mechanic laws and their determinist character did not take into account. What launched science into post-modernity was the irruption of temporality in physics and along with it the idea that energetic transformations were irreversible and thus unpredictable. What then needed to be rethought was the notion that from an initial instant serving as reference point one could both predict the evolution of the system and retrace the different states it had gone through. In other words, according to Prigogine, thermodynamics has brought science to acknowledge the complexity of the phenomena and the impossibility of a perfect and total grasp of their dynamic processes (Prigogine & Stengers 360-361).

Linguistics science is faced with the similar impossibility to isolate the system at a particular instant and predict its evolution or reconstruct its past from there. Predicting the evolution of language is as difficult as trying to explain why some invented words catch on and others do not. As David Crystal makes clear, "as always when we consider lexical innovation, the bigger puzzle is to explain why so many apparently vivid or useful items did *not* appeal" (Crystal 278).11 This may owe much to the fact that linguistic activity is a social democratic enterprise, negotiated at the level of intersubjectivity. Enunciation linguistics has attempted to re-inscribe the subject (of enunciation) in the study of language. However placing him at the centre of the explanation reveals the desire to perceive the subject as dominating his utterance and to refuse to realize that an utterance is always the fruit of non-assignable collective linguistic influences of which the speaking subject is but an effect. As Deleuze and Guattari claim, "there is no individual enunciation. There is not even a subject of enunciation" (Deleuze & Guattari 88).

To recap all that has been said, I will draw on Jean-Jacques Lecercle's pragmatic ALTER structure ([A ← [L → T← E] → R]) which has two advantages. First, it gives the central position not to the speaking subject but to the Text (T) as informed by the Language actant (L) and the Enclyclopaedia (E) corresponding to Jakobson's context. Secondly, it shifts the focus from the author as origin of his text to the reader as receptor, as both Author and Reader are construed as effects of the structure (hence the outward-pointing arrows). In the figure below, I am simply putting a different emphasis on the L actant to illustrate the split between what I have called "inventedness" (the actants Author [A] / Reader [R] are interpellated by Language [L] from above, hence the one-way pointing arrows) and "inventiveness" (the interpellating Language from below offers a possibility for A and R to counterinterpellate, as it both constrains and enables, hence the reversible arrows), or as Deleuze would say, two possible treatments of the same language: either you look for uniformising and universal constants above variables establishing differences between "standard" and "non-standard" forms, or you perceive language as an unstable, unpredictable and

perspective of the particle or that of the wave (see Ricoeur 1227).

11 Such words as "acception, aftercoming, againcoming and aloneness" stemming from Wycliff's Bible were not kept while "absent, adoption, adulteress and allegory" have been (Crystal 241).

heterogeneous system in continuous variation. Jean-Jacques Lecercle's structure leaves some place for the linguist *as* Reader, as an utterance can indeed be analysed differently depending on who receives it. Thus reinventing Lecercle's 1999 book title (*Interpretation as Pragmatics*) and adapting it to my topic, I would advocate a "Linguistics as Pragmatic Interpretation." There might be (and there are) as many different interpretations as they are linguists or schools of linguistics. None is "true" or "correct," some are more just than others but what is sure is that one interpretation does not close the debate;12 it is on the opposite a new argument giving others the right to dissent. The outward-pointing arrows at the centre of the figure are indeed reversible leaving space for "counter-interpellation" for the actants A and R, for a new meaning of the text to be "invented,"13 in its etymological sense:

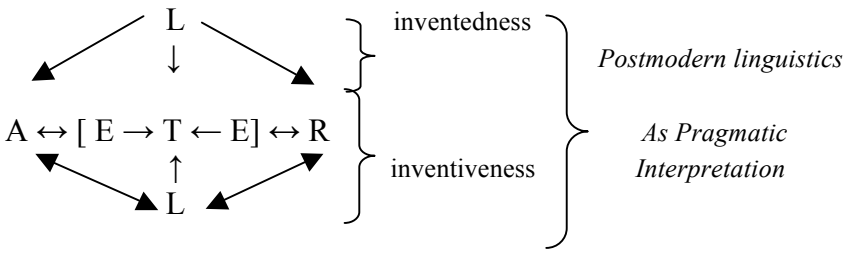

Fig. 2

To avoid finding in itself its own justification, a "postmodern" linguistics aspires to be more encompassing, leaving out no historical, cultural, social but also power-political aspects from which language cannot be disconnected. This makes literary linguistics a good candidate for the role, as it is apt to humbly transform the linguist into an interpreter rather than a possessor of language.

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12 "A just interpretation is one that confirms to the constraints of the pragmatic structure that governs the interpretation of the text, and that does not seek to close the interminable process of reinterpretation" (Lecercle 1999, 33).

13 "We must invent a meaning for the text in the hope that this invention will be archaeological rather than merely imaginative" (Lecercle 1999, 5).

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